

Development Research & Action Group

Annual Report April 2020- March 2021

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools, colleges and educational institutions have strict instructions not to open their doors before the government's go ahead.

As a consequence DRAG's normal activities were curtailed. Both the school and the Women's Centre were shut in the sense there was no physical presence of the children and women. Whereas online classes of the school were organised by the principal Madhu Aggarwal, in the case of the Women's Centre this could not be done despite the efforts of Shivani Yadav, the Centre Head, as many students left Delhi or contracted Covid, and the number of participants did not justify the classes.

DRAG Vikas Kendra

Staff employed during the pandemic

Details :

1. Mrs. Madhu Aggarwal, (Principal of DRAG school)
2. Mrs. Mamta Bisht, (Vice-principal and teacher of class-I)
3. Shweta Tiwari - teacher of class -II
4. Ansheela Shakya - teacher of class-III
5. Pooja Kumari - teacher of class-IV
6. Pooja Gairola - teacher of class-V
7. Shama Malik - afternoon tuition
8. Sarvesh Mathur - afternoon tuition
9. Simran Kaur - Beauty section Teacher
10. Shivani Verma - Stitching and Tailoring Teacher
11. Archana Narwal – helper
12. Ram Prakash - Watchman

Principal Challenges and their Solutions :-

We are an NGO that offers educational and vocational training to under-privileged children. In the present scenario of the pandemic, parents and teaching staff have also to learn to cope with the situation. I therefore talked to some staff of nearby schools in our locality to ascertain how they were functioning and especially how students were faring under this new method of teaching. What was their experience? I spoke to the following teachers :

Mrs. Manju Manchanda – Vice Principle of NEW SAINIK PUBLIC SCHOOL.

Mr. Ravi Dhaiya – Teacher in SDMC Girls Primary School.

They helped and guided me. They shared their class work and suggested that I look for programs on Google and YouTube to see how online classes could be conducted.

We had practically no experience of virtual classes but watching these programs we learnt quite a lot and self-trained ourselves to start virtual classes.

Our first challenge was : How to connect with our students? For that we started to call them or their neighbor to get correct information about the child. We made a list of students and confirmed how many of students had smart phones and how many had ordinary phones.

We found that most parents had simple cell phones and if some did have android phones, it was the privilege of the father to take the phone with him to the work place. Another problem was that as parents, mostly daily wagers, had lost their jobs due to the pandemic they did not have the money to recharge the phone.

Therefore, our first priority was to arrange smart phones to start the Virtual Classes.

For that:-

- 1) Patricia Montalto and Soni Singh arranged 17 new android phones from their sources.
- 2) Doon School Old Boys Society (DSOBS) gifted 7 new smart phones and 200 nutritious food packets .
- 3) Manav Kalyan Samiti – Chairperson Mr. Adlakha and supervisor Mr. Naresh Kapoor gifted 10 new smart phones.

We selected 15 students from the applicants and handed them the smart phones in the presence of Ms. Soni Singh and Manav Kalyan Samiti volunteers, to begin online classes without further delay.

Total no.of students educated through online classes – 200 approx.

Number of students in primary classes/vocational training

Class I	18
Class II	15
Class III	14
Class IV	18
Class V	14
Afternoon tuition (class I to class III)	25
Afternoon tuition (class IV and V)	40
Beauty section	21
Stitching and tailoring	29
Total no. of students	194/200

Points to Note :

- To start online classes, teachers made a WhatsApp group of the students. They shared the study content through images, videos, PDF documents etc.
- We did not raise the salaries of staff during the pandemic, i.e., the last two years.
- The teachers took Virtual classes through WhatsApp and also conducted group discussions and mock tests periodically.
- We fixed two shifts for the classes :-
 - a) 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and
 - b) 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
- From the budget DRAG has spent Rs.18,000/- (Eighteen thousand rupees) for 1) the construction of a septic tank and 2) for work undertaken to raise the level of the entrance door to the level of the road in front of the school.
- In this session, under the supervision of Soni Singh, 33 students have benefited from the scholarship program. DRAG has paid their annual school fees and stationery expenses for their studies in the schools they were registered.
- We received 200 nutritious food packets for under privileged students in 2020 to help the families during the pandemic -
Mrs. Ankita Mittal, graduate of Cambridge University and co-founder of Plush Escape.
Mrs. Swati Pal, Principal of JDMC, Karol Bagh.
- Besides the school syllabus teachers taught some new activities which helped students improve their learning skills, for example, artwork out of waste material and some fun activities which they could also engage in with their parents and friends.
[The lessons were planned and discussed among the DRAG staff and then taught to the students in the WhatsApp group]
- Soni Singh invited Patricia Montalto on Zoom to interact with students and teachers of the scholarship program. It was part of the assessment and students shared their experience and problems they had faced in the online classes.

Festivals and Celebrations

- We shared the underlying significance and importance of festivals with the children. We asked them to draw pictures of scenes during Diwali, Bhaiya Dooj, Children's Day. We helped them to paint diyas and make wall decorations. We showed them how they could wish friends and relatives on WhatsApp and through video calling. And used the opportunity to explain to them how we could thus maintain social distancing yet keep in touch and enjoy festivals. Though this method cannot fully make up for the enjoyment of physical celebrations we can yet enjoy the festivals and share our thoughts with others. Students also made videos and shared them with their families. They learned the importance of family and bonding.
- On Children's Day all teachers played games with their students.
- We celebrated 26 January 2021, India's 74th Republic Day, in school. I unfurled our National Flag supported by Shama Sheikh, Simran Kaur and Shivani Verma, along with a few students and sang our national anthem with great enthusiasm.

Challenges faced by teachers teaching online and how we tried to give and get best –

It has been a challenging period for both teachers and students. All of a sudden, and because of something that is totally out of our control, students are doing distance learning through online classes. As a result both teachers and students had to learn to use new tools and methods to face new and unexpected challenges.

Keeping students engaged and motivated is not an easy task. This has always been the case, but more so now when they are sitting at home and not in the classroom. It is especially difficult for children to adapt to this new and unprecedented situation.

Teachers always keep track of the progress of their students.

We are not talking about standardized tests or exams to evaluate where our students stand academically. Instead, we use modern ways to see how they are doing, and in which areas they need improvement or a little help.

One of the musts of every classroom is having students interact with each other and work together. The WhatsApp group is the only way open to us at the moment to develop and strengthen teamwork.

That's how we worked together to take online /virtual classes during this Covid-19 pandemic.

Problems faced by teachers during online classes -

- Students' attendance is very irregular
- Late submission of daily home work
- Many parents, especially those who were tenants, moved back to their hometowns without any warning.
- Difficult to add more students for online classes due to financial issues. Most parents do not have smart phones and if some do, it is the head of family who takes the phone with him during the day when he is out at work, only to return at night. He obvious cannot afford to buy a new smart phone for his children's online studies.
- As most parents are illiterate, they are unable to help the child in his/her studies.
- Ignorance of parents and lack of diligence on the part of students to do their work on time.

Students' problems in online classes-

- Children miss the school building, teachers and friends. Physical presence has its own dynamics.
- Online classes and training are boring and affect their eyesight.
- Students encounter technical difficulties in operating a smart phone. This is a big problem.
- Students don't have time for online classes as they get easily distracted by other activities.
- Students need to talk to teachers normally not through online classes.
- Students often do not do their homework as there is no monitoring.
- Children find online classes less effective : especially operating a smart phone requires technical knowledge and practice.

Online examination process and challenges for the students.

The online exams for DRAG school students are scheduled to begin from Monday (March 15). It is a stressful time for students especially this year since the exams will be online. The necessary technical aspects such as download, upload, password, internet network have been explained to the students. Students are not comfortable with the technical side of online classes.

We have taken exams through the WhatsApp group. Students have to start and finish the exam in the allotted time.

As and when students complete the exam, teachers examine the copies and give the marks in the same session.

Scholarship program

This year 33 students benefited from the Scholarship Program. DRAG paid for their annual school fees and stationery so that they could continue their studies in the schools they had taken admission in.

In the new academic year, we distributed 13 additional forms to new applicants. Our main focus is to get the girl child to benefit from the program.

Conclusion:-

We have no idea what the world will be like when we get back to normal, or what the new 'normal' is going to be.

What we do know for sure, is that whatever happens in the near future, we need to be ready for it, and have a useful set of skills to tackle whatever is thrown at us in order to forge ahead.

Madhu Aggarwal
(Principal)
DRAG Vikas Kendra

DRAG Farm Report

DRAG's farm project, the DRAG forest as it really is now, is located in Manger village, district Faridabad, Haryana. Manger is situated in a trough of the Aravali Hills, a rocky outcrop with spiky shrubs growing on it, that are much loved by the goats. In the main farmers grow jawar and bajra, hardy crops that can survive on unforgiving land. Always looking for an easy way out, the gujjars preferred mining rocks for the building industry than to grow crops, or perhaps mining was a complementary activity to agriculture to supplement their income. But mining has now been banned by the government as it was eroding the Aravalis.

DRAG's main objective was to prove that even on two acres of land a family of five could survive without falling into the debt trap and without external inputs such as the fertilisers. With this aim in mind it planted trees that provided fuelwood, fodder and fruit trees. The trees also added to the carbon sink in keeping with the Kyoto Protocol.

For some years we had a vegetable patch on which different vegetables were grown, but as the water level dropped drastically, we had to reduce the number of vegetables. Instead we planted more fruit trees : jamun, guavas, citrus, kachnar, papaya, bananas, mango, tamarind, amla... Trees require water in the early stages, but once the roots have gone deep, they survive on their own. We have grown local varieties of trees : subabul, keekar, dhak, gular, pilkan, ficus, mahuwa (from which villagers make a kind of alcohol, but the fruit is eaten like a vegetable, which we sampled).

The forest cover over the DRAG farm is dense and is home to many birds. Peacocks, owls, partridges, parrots, hares, porcupine, squirrels abound.

We have been visiting the farm, except when the lockdown was total. At one point entry to Manger was banned and perhaps because of that no case of COVID has been recorded in the village we are told.

In 2020, the monsoon was heavy, so the trees flourished, but it also brought down the wall bordering Baba's, our neighbor, land to the right. There was a mud slide from his land which brought down the dividing wall. Eventually the mud was levelled and the neighbour rebuilt the wall.

Praveen, our gardener has been planting bougainvillea all along the boundary walls which makes for solid fencing. In the initial years, nilgai (a kind of deer) and goats used to jump over and eat up the vegetables. Also peacocks. The zucchini and leeks – courtesy a French friend – that had been planted were all eaten up. Now apart from the peacocks and the porcupine that gnaws the trunks of the more slender trees, not that much damage is being done.

In Covid times, the farm has proved a de-stresser : away from the concrete and out in the open surrounded by fields, we can relax and sip a cup of tea kindly offered by the mali. The visit generally takes place early morning and we sit on easy chairs and listen to the chirping of birds, talk to the neighbours who always stop by to greet us. The women come and cut the grass for their animals and collect fallen wood for their chullahs.

I reproduce here a passage from the book Reclaiming Wasteland Through Trees by Gautam Vohra.

“First overnight stay in Manger”..... “woke up to a peacock prancing on our field and uttering shrill cries. A female of the species walked behind. He fluttered his body and soon his tail fanned out in splendid display. The smaller birds sitting on the electric wire and the boundary fence watched in silent awe. The lady ignored the show off and continued to peck at the ground, seemingly more interested in filling her belly. The peacock walked closer to her and shuddered, with the tail feathers again spread out to catch her eye. She let him do his thing and then wandered away, haughty, maybe disdainful.”

Priya Sen
Honorary Secretary
Development Research & Action Group (DRAG)